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**Corporatist European Countries and Wales: Two Peas
Across the Pond? A Typology of Political Cooperation**

Amélia Webber

Master of Science in International & European Politics

Supervisor: Alan Convery

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Abstract

As votes shift and governments seek to cope with modern political challenges, the UK and Europe have encountered a similar need for political cooperation and longer-term collaboration. This dissertation uncovers what factors shape political cooperation, and seeks to study how so-called path-dependent UK majoritarian democracies can institutionally grow closer to consensus democracies by implementing such factors into their own political systems. To do so, this dissertation designs a typology of political cooperation, gathering macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors. It then tests our expectations about path-dependency by applying it to a case study, the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that while our typology gathers factors that have considerable explanatory power, they are not deterministic. The Welsh case reveals the gap between designing a new institution and building the social willingness to populate it, which is a crucial, yet invisible condition for long-term collaboration. The Welsh case is thus analytically interesting for historical-institutionalist studies because it shows that path dependency is real but not absolute.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	0
Acknowledgements	2
Table of Contents	3
1. Introduction.....	4
1.1 Puzzle and Research Questions.....	4
1.2 Methodology.....	6
1.3 Definitions	7
2. Literature Review – Typology	10
2.1 Macro-Level: Structural Factors.....	10
2.1.1 Country Size & Macroeconomics.....	10
2.1.2 Democratic Model	13
2.1.3 Electoral Rules and Party System.....	13
2.1.4 Interest group Organisation: Pluralism & Corporatism	16
2.2 Meso-Level: Institutional and Historical Factors.....	19
2.2.1 Starting Conditions: past history, power imbalance	19
2.2.2 Institutional Design: rules, predictability and procedural legitimacy	20
2.3 Micro-Level: Process-Related Factors	22
2.3.1 Policy Area	22
2.3.2 Belief congruence and Preference Similarity	23
2.3.3 Facilitative Leadership and Leader Personality	24
2.3.4 Psychological Factors and Face-to-Face Dialogue	25
3. Case Study: The Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act (2023).....	26
3.1 Macro-level: Structural Factors	27
3.2 Meso-level: Cultural and Historical Factors.....	31
3.3 Micro-level: Process-related factors	33
4. Concluding Discussion.....	34
5. Bibliography	37

1. Introduction

1.1 Puzzle and Research Questions

It is no secret that many governments are currently encountering serious political and financial issues, facing increasing gridlocks and immobilism despite the need for urgent reforms in many sectors (Bundy & Kerr, 10th December 2025). When traditional parties fail to build consensus, votes polarise, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy tearing democracies from the inside. The stakes keep rising, and so does the price of failure: the intensifying discourse of crisis and unpopular reforms surrounding politics causes significant losses of legitimacy when parties fail to deliver adequate change (Weaver, 1986; Mounk 2018; Müller 2016).

Why is political cooperation so hard to obtain? The complexity of cooperation lies in the fact that its actors are situated inside the broader political system, which includes fragmented technical, financial, and political resources in different sectors. Since ‘no actor alone has enough resources to unilaterally influence political decision making’ (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 5), cooperation becomes obligatory if actors want to influence policy outputs; this is why cooperation is viewed as a desirable outcome in modern democracies. However, in collective bargaining contexts, cooperation is not always a central concern. In many cases, when interests diverge, actors are more likely to compete for advantage than to bind themselves to shared arrangements that might constrain their own agency (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 551; Browne & Rice, 1979: 67). Yet across a range of institutional settings, cooperation does emerge. In those cases, it is frequently credited with producing self-enforcing, more durable and legitimate policy outcomes than adversarial alternatives; in other words, creating longstanding collaboration (Ibid.: 561; Cairney & Toomey, 2024). Where there is collaboration, there is greater buy-in from affected groups, better implementation, and a policymaking culture that involves a sense of social duty, which survives changes of government (Katzenstein, 1985: 97-98). This is the appeal that underpins the literatures on (neo)corporatism and, more recently, collaborative governance, both of which treat collaboration not as an accident but as something that can be institutionally engineered. Therein lie two guiding questions: **A) What are the factors that shape political cooperation? B) Can they be manufactured and implemented successfully in a different type of democracy?**

Guided by this interest in political cooperation, some scholars have sought answers through comparison with other democracies. We observed that when some UK policymakers and academics look at European political cooperation, there is the prevalent idea that they are culturally and structurally ‘stuck’ on different paths (Lijphart, 2012: 300). Some suggest that the way they collaborate is fundamentally different, as if certain countries’ political actors were more willing to cooperate than at home. This is what Katzenstein refers to as the myth of Bacon's New Atlantis (Katzenstein, 1985: 94-95): the idealisation of consensus, without studying what actually brought it on. This is why we avoid producing value judgements regarding different types of democracies’ political cooperation: foundational scholars of democracy theory have already tried, only to encounter a healthy amount of criticism (Ganghof & Eppner, 2019; Ganghof, 2010; Taagepera, 2003). Rather, this dissertation focuses on analysing what shapes political cooperation in a democracy, and how path-dependent it is. Such a puzzle is at the core of historical institutionalism, which is our theoretical anchor: it holds that institutions affect the behaviour of political actors, and that institutional configurations, once established, become self-reinforcing through path dependency, narrowing the range of possible reforms (Pierson, 2000: 251; Steinmo, 2008; Skogstad, 2023). Some scholars have added to this by arguing that cooperation itself is historically produced and socially reproduced, not innately institutional or cultural (Thelen: 2001; Thelen & Streeck, 2005; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Take the example of Luxembourg: a small country with a longstanding corporatist tradition, a system of interest representation that has successfully delivered consensus on socio-economic policies for more than fifty years (Allegrezza et al., 2013; Clément, 2011). This mode of collective bargaining is so socially ingrained in Luxembourg that 63% of its population believe that recent contentious reform decisions should not be taken without prior agreement with the social partners (Crepon, 2025). In comparison, the UK’s corporatist attempt in the 60s-70s failed to deliver any meaningful policy change, before being rejected and repudiated (Ramsden, 2006).

However, even in the ‘cold climate’ of the Westminster system, there has been a recent case of institutional engineering¹ targeted toward corporatist cooperation. The Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023 is a path-breaking attempt by the Senedd Cymru to build collaborative infrastructure without a corporatist history to support

¹ Taagepera coined the term ‘constitutional engineering’ (Taagepera, 2003: 2). In our case, such engineering happened more through institutional design rather than constitutional change.

it, placing it in a uniquely hybrid system of interest representation, with an equally unique set of structural, historical, and process-related factors. Despite the Act still being in its early stages, we investigate whether this attempt succeeded in creating political collaboration. We ultimately argue that while our typology gathers factors that have considerable explanatory power, they are not deterministic. The Welsh case reveals that consultation obligations are a necessary but insufficient condition for lasting collaboration: the structural and social factors of our typology must also be studied. That gap between designing new institutions and building the social willingness to populate it is a usually invisible condition for collaboration; the Welsh case is thus analytically interesting for historical institutionalism because it shows that path dependency is real but not absolute.

Our analysis begins with the literature review of political collaboration: simultaneously, we build a typology of the main factors that impact collective policymaking. This typology has three levels: the macro-level, which are the overarching structural factors shaping democracies and their governance models; the meso-level, which are socio-cultural and historical factors, and finally the micro-level, which are factors related to individual processes of collective bargaining. We then use this typology as a framework to analyse the Welsh case study to investigate our second research question, giving a concrete example of path-breaking institutional engineering and evaluating its success. We then discuss these findings and draw conclusions that enlighten our research question on collective decision-making abilities.

1.2 Methodology

This work is built around the qualitative analysis of a case study. As we started to understand the nature of conflict and collaboration in different democracies, the need for a case study quickly grew because ‘the nature of conflict in the industrial society is probably best understood in particular contexts (Barbash, 1979: 646). The logic behind our case selection was that we sought out a least-likely case (Gerring, 2016: 102-103) to fully challenge assumptions about path-dependence. Wales’ trajectory, as a devolved country, is heavily impacted by the Westminster² model; however, it has recently introduced an Act which aims to institutionally encourage industrial relations and cooperation. A single case

²Following Lijphart, we use the term ‘Westminster model’ interchangeably with majoritarian model of democracy (Lijphart, 2012: 9).

study of this type can therefore contribute to research about political cooperation and collaboration (see Flyvbjerg, 2006).

If we wanted to test our expectations about political cooperation and path-dependency, we needed a typology to apply to this case study: a typology is the ‘study of types, or a system of dividing things into types’ (Cambridge Dictionary), commonly used in political sciences as an analytical device (Collier et al., 2008; Bailey, 1994; George & Bennett, 2005). Our typology, informed by democratic theory, collaborative governance and corporatist literature, operationalises what path-dependency actually consists of by breaking down the enabling conditions for collaboration so that we may assess a country’s organisation of interests systematically. This typology organically grew from this broad research: our methodology therefore rested on qualitative documentary analysis, although some of our sources leading up to our typology were also quantitative meta-analyses (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Lijphart, 1984).

The main risk of using a typology is that our analysis could become descriptive rather than analytical if we map present or absent factors without explaining why. Typologies are made to help keep a mental image of the structure of our analysis: as such, typologies need a degree of abstraction, and however empirically justified, they remain a list of ideal types. We decided to remedy this by applying our typology to a case study; this demonstrates the extent to which certain factors appear designable or path-dependent, and allows for more nuance instead of accepting the typology as is. This means that our analysis is not purely descriptive, but also critical. It is important to acknowledge, however, that our typology remains open-ended: there are many more micro-level factors which are underreported, especially regarding groupthink and emotional factors (Hart, 2010; Crawford, 2000; Kushner Gadarian & Brader, 2023). For this reason, in our case study we could not address all our micro-level factors (George & Bennett, 2005: 105).

1.3 Definitions

Cooperation vs collaboration: cooperation describes a type of one-off, often transactional bargaining outcome. Cooperation can coexist with competition on other fronts, and does not necessarily require actors to share recognition of each other or build longer-term social relationships. Rather, actors rely on short-term calculations which show when interests align enough to make cooperation worthwhile. Game-theoretic and rational-choice studies (including much of the classical corporatist

literature, see Schmitter, 1974) tend to use cooperation in this sense: a stable pattern of interaction between actors who remain, in principle, adversaries (Putnam, 1988: 433). Collaboration, on the other hand, implies a long-term ongoing process of decision-making, often involving shared problem definition, pooled resources, and a degree of mutual trust, shared commitment and ownership over outcomes. This concept emerges from collaborative governance literature, and is expanded upon in Ansell and Gash's (2008) meta-analysis. Collaboration is usually framed as more demanding to sustain (it requires trust-building, repeated interaction, and binding structures) but also as producing more durable social buy-in than simple cooperation.

Collaborative governance: Collaborative governance is the process-level theoretical lens we use to analyse political cooperation, which emerged from public administration studies (Ansell & Gash 2008). It describes arrangements where public agencies bring together any non-state stakeholders, like NGOs, businesses, or even civil community groups into formal, consensus-oriented decision-making processes. It encourages decision-making through dialogue, trust-building, and deliberation. As an administrative concept, collaborative governance can be opposed to alternative patterns of policy making like adversarialism and managerialism (Ibid.: 547). Unlike corporatism, which is a structural concept, collaborative governance is a practice.

Corporatism: conceptualised as a pragmatic capitalist settlement of interest representation, rather than an ideology, as is sometimes argued (Schmitter, 1985: 37; Lehmbruch, 1977: 93). It evolves according to a country's needs: it is 'a function of both historical development and path-dependency (as well as political struggle within these confines)' (Welsh, 2026: 236; see also Schmitter 1974: 92). Corporatism is built around three actors: the state, workers' unions, and employer organisations. The latter two are concentrated into 'peak organisations' with memberships that can either be compulsory (such as in the Netherlands) or voluntary (such as in Luxembourg), bargaining in their own sectors (Aumayr-Pintar, 2020: 107). These peak organisations are 'noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognised or licensed by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demand and supports' (Schmitter 1974: 93-94). Lehmbruch also conceptualises corporatism as a mode of governance through concertations in which interest groups are drawn into co-responsible relationships for

socioeconomic policy outcomes (Lehmbruch, 1977: 17-18). This is why peak organisations are referred to as social partners.

Pluralism: another model of interest representation, characterised by the ‘predominance of “pressure-group” politics and the lobbying of government agencies and parliament by fragmented and competing interest groups, and by a low degree of effective participation by unions in policy-making’ (Lehmbruch, 2003: 7). This model tends to be related to majoritarian democracies (Lijphart, 2012: 158). Behind pluralism and corporatism are different logics: pluralists follow the logic of the liberal ‘organic’ market, while corporatism subscribe to the Keynesian logic of state intervention (Schmitter, 1974: 97; see Keynes, 1926/2010).

Path dependence: path dependence is an umbrella term from contextual political analysis which covers several distinct ways that historical processes shape present outcomes. The idea is that early contingent events set institutional or political trajectories that become progressively locked in through self-reinforcing mechanisms, narrowing the range of options for these path-dependent actors (Pierson, 2000: 251). It describes the self-reinforcing character of these outcomes and their resulting ‘locked in’ quality or, alternatively, the branching effect of critical junctures that changes its path (Mahoney & Schensul, 2006). The extent to which path-dependency would be deterministic remains up to debate (Ibid.: 469).

2. Literature Review – Typology

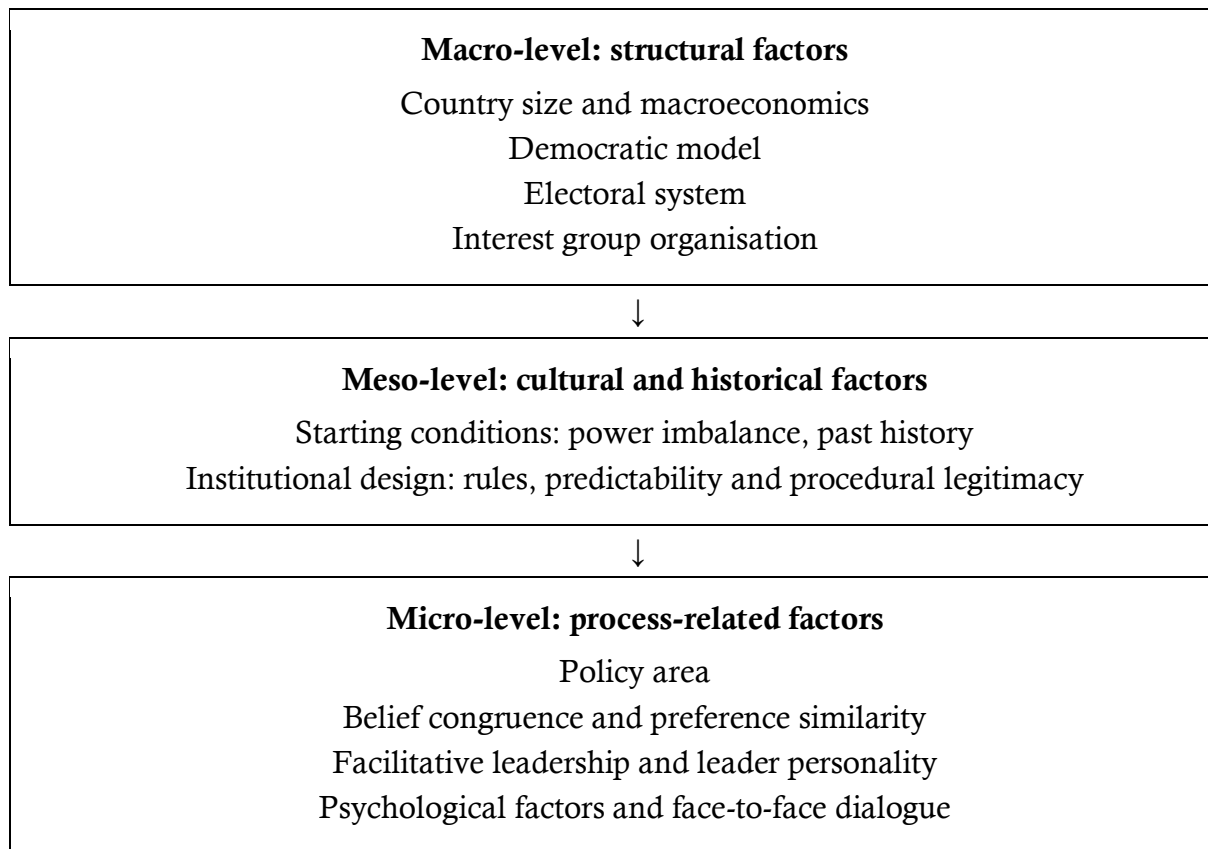


Figure 1.

Typology of Factors Impacting Political Cooperation

2.1 Macro-Level: Structural Factors

To understand how democracies organise their interest representation model and how they approach political collaboration, we must start with their most overarching conditions, which are usually the most path-dependent as they are near impossible or very difficult to modify.

2.1.1 Country Size & Macroeconomics

Peter Katzenstein, echoing our original puzzle, remarked that ‘because of their size, the small European countries are often viewed as harmonious manifestations of Bacon's New Atlantis myth—endowed with coherence, agility, and intelligence’ (Katzenstein, 1985: 94-95). Small European states are pictured as ‘socially homogeneous’, therefore more prone to consensus-building and more effective policy-wise (Lijphart, 2012: 54-57). Size does seem to have a heavily constraining effect on policymaking, but not in the way

we might expect. Size and 'social homogeneity' are not directly related to political collaboration: rather, size forces economic openness, which historically impacted industrial organisation, which in turn shaped political regimes and interest representation models (Katzenstein, 2003: 208).

A country's size affects how it survives in capitalist systems: 'small countries are more open and vulnerable than large ones, economically, politically, and militarily' (Ibid.: 80). To survive in an increasingly globalised world market, small European states were forced to develop functional internal coordination and consensus. This can be seen in how international crises have repeatedly strengthened cooperative arrangements in these states. In the aftermath of the World Wars, trade deficits in small European countries highly vulnerable to import inflation from world markets made socio-economic policies like control over wages and prices all the more urgent, which reinforced the need for swift consensus among social actors (Ibid.: 95). The usual adversarial relationship between state, capital and workers became entangled: 'the logic of economic vulnerability prevailed over the logic of worker militancy in forcing political outcomes that stressed consensual wage bargaining' (Ibid.: 96). This meant that for socio-economic matters, these states integrated unions directly into the decision-making process (Siaroff, 1999: 175).

Hall & Soskice (2001) call them 'coordinated market economies' (CME), a type of economy in which 'firms depend more heavily on non-market relationships to coordinate their endeavours with other actors and to construct their core competencies. These non-market modes of coordination generally entail [...] more reliance on collaborative, as opposed to competitive, relationships to build the competencies of the firm' (Hall & Soskice, 2001: 8). In contrast, liberal market economies (LMEs) 'rely heavily on the market relationship between individual worker and employer to organise relations with their labour force [...] Firms are under no obligation to establish representative bodies for employees such as works councils; and trade unions are generally less powerful than in CMEs. Because trade unions and employer associations in LMEs are less cohesive and encompassing, economy-wide wage coordination is generally difficult to secure' (Ibid.: 30). CMEs thus create institutions that 'reduce the uncertainty actors have about the behaviour of others' (Ibid.: 10), enabling greater commitment and collaboration. This type of industrial organisation functionally brings sectoral-specific firms and workers interests closer, because they have invested in many common assets like industry-specific schemes, sector-wide agreements and contracting networks. The effects are self-reinforcing: 'the

political dynamic inspired by globalisation in these countries is likely to entail less class conflict and to centre around the formation of cross-class coalitions, as firms and workers with intense interests in particular regulatory regimes align against those with interests in others' (Ibid.: 58). In contrast, in an LME, firms and workers invest in different assets; because their investments are relatively mobile, capital and labour are more likely to have divergent interests when facing external pressure. The result is class conflict along left-right axes.

Scholars have noticed that under such pressure for collaboration, throughout the postwar decades small CME countries oftentimes developed corporatist institutions (Lehmbruch, 2003: 4). As a structural evolution, corporatism aimed to achieve politico-industrial consensus as it regulated 'the conflict of social classes in the distribution of national income and in the structure of industrial relations' (Lehmbruch, 1977: 95). Corporatism developed as a way for capitalism to 'reproduce the conditions of its existence and continually to accumulate further resources' (Schmitter, 1974: 107). The process goes alongside the Social Democratic Model, where labour movements are integrated in parliamentary politics and policymaking through dominant socialist parties and centralised corporatist institutions (Katzenstein, 1985: 97-100). Conversely, larger LMEs have not known 'the coincidence of political opportunities and social convergences, reinforced by economic openness and the perception of vulnerability, [which] weaken the winner-take-all mentality and enhance willingness to bargain with political opponents' (Ibid.: 173). Britain, with its 'class-based ideology and politics, as well as the decentralised structure of its trade union movement and producer groups, defeated repeated attempts in the 1960s and 1970s by both Labour and Conservative governments to construct corporatist arrangements' (Ibid.: 94). In the case of Britain, size, interest representation models, 'mentality' (in Katzenstein's words, pp.157 and 173) and historical union movements all played a part in what set the country on a path-dependent direction away from corporatism and its consensus model. These are all factors that appear later in our typology.

It is important to recognise that 'to be useful for analysis, size should be considered a variable rather than a constant' (Ibid.: 80). Katzenstein's examples of Salazar's Portugal and Dollfuss's Austria (Ibid.: 31) illustrate that small states have also produced closed economies with different interest representation systems. Like for most of our factors, the relationship between these variables and political cooperation is not automatic but rather closely related to other enabling factors (Ibid.: 95). The size factor already drew links

between economy, industrial organisation, party systems, and historical collaboration. To understand how small states developed this ‘culture of compromise’, we must move further down into our macro-level.

2.1.2 Democratic Model

Lijphart’s (2012) ambition with his patterns of democracy research was to reduce ‘the great variety of formal and informal rules and institutions that we find in democracies’ to a ‘clear two-dimensional pattern on the basis of the contrast between majoritarian and consensus forms of government’ (Lijphart, 2012: XVIII). The idea underpinning this majoritarian-consensus divide comes from the fundamental differences in how a society defines democracy: majoritarian democracies believe that in case of disagreements, the government is responsive to the majority of the people, while consensus democracies believe that it must respond to as many people as possible (Lijphart, 2012: 2; Powell, 2000: 31-42). The consensus model ‘accepts majority rule only as a minimum requirement: instead of being satisfied with narrow decision-making majorities, it seeks to maximise the size of these majorities. Its rules and institutions aim at broad participation in government and broad agreement on the policies that the government should pursue [...] the majoritarian model of democracy is exclusive, competitive, and adversarial, whereas the consensus model is characterised by inclusiveness, bargaining, and compromise’ (Ibid.).

Lijphart goes on to study these democratic models by designing indices to measure how they share or concentrate power and organise interest groups. While his measures were later criticised and refined (Ganghof & Eppner, 2019; Ganghof, 2010; Taagepera, 2003), his research informed our baseline expectations: different models of democracy shape countries’ electoral systems, governance style, and institutions. Echoing Katzenstein’s analysis, this provides us with a first set of factors for our typology: namely, the idea that democratic models, electoral rules, institutions, and interest representation models impact policymaking and political cooperation.

2.1.3 Electoral Rules and Party System

Both Lijphart and Katzenstein named electoral rules as a factor that heavily influences both the dynamics of coalition formation and how labour is integrated into corporatist arrangements (Katzenstein, 1985: 100). Small European states tend to use proportional representation³, in which the principle of proportionality ‘encourages a sharing of power

³ Henceforth referred to as PR.

among different political actors' (Ibid.). These countries experience regular minority governments, which strongly impacts the policy process. In minority governments where none of the parties can acquire an independent majority, 'the means available to the opposition would be compromises; its tactics, bargaining [...] Minority governments are a rational response for parties that are oriented primarily toward influencing policy rather than accumulating patronage' (Ibid.: 101). Such parties are 'more likely to depart from the zero-sum model of political competition' (Ibid.: 100) than in non-PR countries. Combined with the necessities of an open economy, this distinctive party system enabled political collaboration (Ibid.: 103).

On the other hand, larger majoritarian states have a larger number of national constituencies and a siloed system of pluralistic interests. The Westminster model is one of the most intense regarding the concentration of executive power within a one-party or bare majority cabinet (Lijphart, 2012: 10-11). Coalition cabinets are rare, and the bulk of seats are usually captured by the Conservatives and Labour traditional parties (Ibid.: 13; Wager, 2024). Katzenstein and Lijphart argue that this phenomenon is directly tied to the single-member plurality electoral system used in UK general elections (first past the post, or FPTP), which disincentivises electoral support for parties that struggle to achieve local pluralities (Lijphart, 2012: 13-14; Powell, 2000: 28-30; Harrison, 22nd May 2026). This claim is mostly based on studies of district magnitude, measuring entry barriers for smaller parties (Ganghof & Eppner, 2019: 117; Taagepera, 1989: 112). Reinforced by the fact that large majoritarian countries were less concerned by the exigencies of an open economy, political partisanship thus became more important, especially on questions of economic policy.

However, we are witnessing the fragmentation of this traditional electoral landscape. Fragmentation already existed around the 2010 elections (which led to a coalition government), but the 2024 performance produced the most fragmented party system in British history, with non-traditional party candidates winning their highest ever number of seats (Heath et al., 2025: 91). These elections also saw the gap between vote share and seat share become the most disproportionate on record (Miori & Green, 2025: 37). It is unsurprising that multi-party politics under FPTP, a system designed for two-party competition, leads to warped electoral outcomes (Quinn, 2026: 71; Hughes, 2024; Lijphart, 2012: 14). This has led multiple scholars, voters, and MPs to call for institutional reform, switching to the PR model (Thompson, 2025; McKiernan, 2026; Difford, 2025). The UK

stays a majoritarian democracy in institutional design, but its electoral outcomes have diverged sharply: in other words, Britain is a country without coalitional culture producing multi-party electoral behaviour, pulling PR-using devolved countries along (White, 2026). This will resurface during our case study.

We initially thought that compulsory voting, which tends to occur in multi-party PR systems, would be a factor encouraging political cooperation. However, that is not the case for all electoral systems. When turnout is artificially levelled, the electorate includes low-interest voters who in voluntary majoritarian systems would stay home. This balances the ideological distribution of votes: extreme parties lose the relative advantage they gain in low-turnout voluntary systems, where their highly motivated base turns out disproportionately and generates more polarised results (Oprea et al., 2024: 1955). Compulsory voting can also contribute to reverse socioeconomic inequalities that drive support for populist parties through the egalitarian effects that it has on policymaking (Malkopoulou, 2020: 1). The median voter moves closer to the centre, decreasing party polarisation, which is useful to avoid political gridlock and facilitate coalition formation, especially when combined with PR. However, in two-party systems where coalitions are rare, incentives for cooperation actually decrease: with less veto players in majority governments, the cost of unilateral action lessens, therefore lowering the need for coalitions (Tsebelis, 1995: 322-323). This is logical in a majoritarian understanding of democracy: precisely because winning a majority is sufficient to lead, majoritarian systems by design concentrate executive power in a single party, removing the incentive to share power (the ‘winner-take-all logic’, see Lijphart, 2012: 130, and Katzenstein, 1985: 157). In majoritarian systems, forcing those who are not interested in (or informed about) politics to vote increases the proportion of random votes, increasing the chances of a less popular candidate to be elected (Jakee & Sun, 2006: 61; Destri, 2024: 817; see also Selb & Lachat, 2009). This means that while compulsory voting in PR elections can help produce larger majorities for parties that are less prone to gridlocks, the same will not necessarily happen for majoritarian elections. The compulsory vote factor can thus be a background enabling factor for party collaboration in consensus democracies with PR, but gives inconclusive results for majoritarian democracies.

2.1.4 Interest group Organisation: Pluralism & Corporatism

Corporatism (cf. definitions) is an important concept that kept recurring in our literature, being closely related to collaborative policymaking. Essentially, corporatism attempts to 'deideologise' (Schmitter, 1974: 98) contentious policy to facilitate cooperation in industrial relations. We saw that corporatist systems emerged in time of crisis to 'aid political parties in the task of building consensus on issues where the competitive character of the party system would have counter-productive effects' (Lehmbruch, 2003: 17). Corporatist institutions 'enhanc[ed] political predictability by facilitating cooperation and compromise [...] featuring both widespread acceptance of the national interest and political accommodation among public and private actors' (Katzenstein, 1985: 97-98). Predictability and recognition of mutual interest then formed a virtuous cycle whereby tripartite talks⁴ reinforced partners' trust and commitment, giving more legitimacy for the process, and therefore reinforcing its stability in the long term (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 558-559). Successful cases of this virtuous cycle can lead to longstanding collaboration even if social partners withdraw and terminate partnerships. In Luxembourg for example, following the failure of the spring 2010 tripartite talks (Castegnaro & Claverie, 2010), the Union of Luxembourg Enterprises (UEL) withdrew from future tripartite meetings, followed by huge national demonstrations (Castegnaro & Claverie, 2011). All social partners acknowledged that the several bipartite talks that followed between the government and UEL defused tensions; but none of the social partners wanted to commit to bipartite discussions as a permanent replacement. Tripartite talks returned with the new coalition government in December 2013, although with a lot of new conflicts to deal with (Kerschen, 2016: 443-444). This suggests the partners retained the option to exit cooperation structures but ultimately preferred re-entry, consistent with our observation that corporatism can lead to long-term political collaboration. This shows the importance of repeated opportunities for collaboration and the mutual recognition of social partners, even despite failure to reach consensus. We will come back to this in subsequent meso- and micro-level factors.

Lijphart argued that 'the typical interest group system of majoritarian democracy is a competitive and uncoordinated pluralism of independent groups in contrast with the coordinated and compromise-oriented system of democratic corporatism that is typical of

⁴ Name given to corporatist collective bargaining between unions, state, and employer's organisations.

the consensus model' (Lijphart, 2012: 158). Previous factors seem to point that way too: as we have seen, 'coordination-oriented policies will be more difficult to implement in LMEs because their business and labour associations usually lack the encompassing character required to administer such policies well' (Hall & Soskice, 2001: 48). Indeed, social partners may be less willing to enter collective governance processes in countries where they do not possess enough influence to sanction the government should it abuse the bargaining process: this issue is especially salient in countries 'where the powers of the state are highly concentrated in the political executive or where the influence of producer groups inside political parties is very limited' (Ibid.: 48-49). Because of its high concentration of powers in the executive and less cohesive unions history, the Westminster model was generally unsuccessful with its attempts for industrial rationalisation; other social groups were reluctant to trust it (Ibid.; see also Wood 1997). From 1964 to 1976, during a time marked by economic challenges and industrial unrest, Harold Wilson's Labour government and Edward Heath's Conservative government attempted to implement the corporatist model. Through the National Economic Development Council (NEDC) (Ringe, 1998), they aimed to shape a National Plan of industrial growth policies. The model did not hold, and ever since Thatcher's dismantling of the NEDC, the UK has remained very suspicious of corporatist models, preferring pluralist interest representations where 'interest groups advise, lobby, entreat, and influence elected officials in order to reach their political objectives, but they do so outside the institutions of government' (Welsh, 2026: 219). Consequent reorientations of economic policy (such as with Thatcherism) had a very different approach to unions and extensive effects on the size of the public sector, setting the UK on its path-dependent trajectory for pluralist interest representation (see Crouch, 1979) and drawing it further away from corporatism (Katzenstein, 1985: 103-104). Lehmbruch classifies the UK as 'weakly corporatist' because of this historical episode (Lehmbruch, 2003: 8), but the Westminster model of interest representation is functionally pluralist (Lijphart, 2012: 16).

Many British scholars remain critical of corporatism: they find that corporatist cooperation is doomed to fail because 'both trade unions and businesses are self-interested groups whose first priority is to represent the interests and needs of workers and shareholders respectively' (Gibbs, 2026), presenting pluralism as the only answer. Scholars also argue that institutions such as the NEDC break the democratic chain of accountability between voters, elected decision-makers and policy outcomes, and that social partners

cannot be held accountable (Welsh, 2026: 235). While questions of democratic representation and exclusion are genuine criticisms regarding corporatism (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 551-556), actors are not free of accountability; in Luxembourg, governing parties suffered a decline in popularity following conflicts with trade unions and unsuccessful reforms (RTL Today, 12th September 2025). Corporatism does exhibit asymmetrical losses: while unions and employer organisations have the right to walk out, it is predominantly the government that bears the consequences of this failure. If the traditional consensus process is broken, the state must come up with subsequent initiatives to avoid election losses, while employers and unions walk relatively free of consequences (see Kerschen, 2016). This is an increasingly unavoidable and deleterious tendency in a system of finite resources that cannot go on with infinite growth (cf. p.13).

The strongest examples of collective governance showcase trust and longstanding commitment between social actors: trust building is a 'time-consuming process that requires a long-term commitment to achieving collaborative outcomes' (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 559). The UK's apparent incompatibility with corporatist models can therefore be less attributed to the innate nature of conflicting interests, and more to the country's specific historical, political, and cultural context. Indeed, while corporatism can seem like a highly structural factor, Thelen (2001) reminds us that cooperative structures alone cannot do much for long-term collaboration if they are not politically populated. Criticising the deterministic conceptualisation of path-dependence (Mahoney & Schensul, 2006: 464), she remarks that 'much of the literature in this area treats such [cooperation]⁵ as a 'thing' that some countries have and others lack, when in reality it is a political process, and an outcome that has to be actively sustained and nurtured' (Thelen, 2001: 73-74). This challenges the purely functionalist reading of the factors we have uncovered so far: cooperation is not simply the equilibrium of certain institutional and economical configurations, since it also requires ongoing relational interactions. Tripartite talks are therefore conceptualised as self-reinforcing collective bargaining processes between social partners; this transitions into our next typological level of institutional and historical factors.

⁵ Thelen uses the words 'relational coordination', but for clarity and coherence purposes we use cooperation instead.

2.2 Meso-Level: Institutional and Historical Factors

With what we have uncovered, we can now see that ‘corporatism does not magically transform social and political hostility into harmony. Instead, it offers an institutional mechanism for mobilising the consensus necessary to live with the costs of rapid economic change’ (Katzenstein, 1985: 200). This institutional mechanism, usually a Council that meets reactively or on a regular basis, modifies relations between social partners; just like Thelen (2001) pointed out, these modifications create relational or social opportunity structures for stakeholders to bargain, share common interest, and build mutual acknowledgement and trust (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 3). By involving stakeholders directly instead of letting lobbying groups exert pressure on individual decisionmakers, collaborative governance under corporatism ‘shifts “ownership” of decision making from the agency to the stakeholders acting collectively’, fostering a sense of ownership of the process, implying shared responsibility (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 559). This leads stakeholders to reconceptualise their involvement and relationships. In other words, institutional design and incentives are not enough to ensure collaboration: ‘even when collaborative governance is mandated, achieving “buy in” is still an essential aspect of the collaborative process’ especially for the long-term (Ibid.: 560). By encouraging cooperative relations these institutions end up creating a virtuous circle of collaboration which ‘facilitates coordination and communication, reduces incentives for opportunism, and helps actors to overcome collective action dilemmas’ (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 5). This relational aspect underpins most of the remaining factors in our typology.

2.2.1 Starting Conditions: past history, power imbalance

Theories of collaborative decision-making underline the importance of institutions because they condition the start of cooperative processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Fischer & Sciarini, 2016). The first example of this is the starting condition of power imbalance and the impact it has on cooperation. The importance of rules conditioning actors’ access to policymaking institutions cannot be underestimated: ‘if some stakeholders do not have the capacity, organisation, status, or resources to participate, or to participate on an equal footing with other stakeholders, the collaborative governance process will be prone to manipulation by stronger actors’ (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 551). To prevent this, a range of strategies can empower weaker or underrepresented groups (see Mitchell, 2005: 129-131). While there is no single way to guarantee symmetric power, a large number of these strategies anticipate the need for stakeholders to have the infrastructure necessary to be

represented: the skill and expertise to engage in discussions about highly technical problems, as well as the time, energy, or liberty to engage in collaborative processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 551). For corporatist models, institutional design is precisely what is supposed to prevent one actor from dominating outcomes. The state manages asymmetry through terms of recognition; state-sanctioned actors are given monopoly over their sector's representation to avoid internal competition. As we saw, this is where democratic legitimacy becomes contested: recognition is conditional on the actor submitting to a degree of state oversight of its internal governance (Schmitter 1974: 93-94; Lehmbruch, 1977: 17-18).

Some conditions for cooperation, however, are also somehow independent from institutions: aside from formal rules and institutional design, a crucial factor shaping cooperation is past history. Informal relational opportunity structures like consultation procedures or policy committees can pre-exist formal collaborative institutions. Successful joint participation in these informal procedures has a positive impact on collaborative relationship formation later on, showing the importance of social dialogue even despite lacking levers of power (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 24). A history of successful 'small wins' creates high levels of trust and build momentum for successful collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 561). Conversely, if actors have a history of conflict, they come to the table with a set of expectations that hinders cooperation (Zafonte and Sabatier 1998: 502). Longstanding antagonism is thus 'an additional, psychological obstacle to overcome [...] a prehistory of conflict is likely to express itself in low levels of trust, which in turn will produce low levels of commitment, strategies of manipulation, and dishonest communications' (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 553). However, high conflict per se is not an obstacle for collaboration if power is shared and stakeholders are structurally highly interdependent: during crises, policy deadlocks can actually create a strong impetus for collaborative governance, because the deadlock itself imposes serious costs on all stakeholders, intensifying incentives to find a solution (Ibid.). As we have seen, this is what happened in many postwar corporatist states.

2.2.2 Institutional Design: rules, predictability and procedural legitimacy

Taagepera argued that since institutional rules for political cooperation are imposed through legislation, they are subject to direct design ('institutional engineering'), thus making collective governance possibly implementable even in path-dependent contexts

(Taagepera, 2003: 2). Institutional rules drive the exchange of information, facilitate social actors' access to resources, their room for manoeuvre and, ultimately, their influence on policy outputs. This is why institutional design is crucial: it is the second biggest factor that impacts actors' bargaining calculations, save for other actors' immediate influence.

The institutional design factor is therefore straightforward: when creating new institutions, basic protocols and clear rules for collaboration must be enshrined to ensure procedural legitimacy (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 555, 559). While those rules vary across political systems, the general idea is that the more collective governance formally disperses power and therefore depends on cooperation, the stronger the need for rules and conventions (Weller et al., 2021: 98). The reason is that the more cooperation is needed, the more predictability becomes important (Ibid.: 122; Barbash, 1979: 650); and institutional rules are there to ensure predictability (cf. p.17). As we saw, because market relations do not demand the same levels of common knowledge favoured by CMEs, deregulating cooperative relations is a lot easier than building them (Hall & Soskice, 2001: 64). Formal rules are therefore crucial to safeguard collaboration; without them, the lack of predictability may jeopardise collaborative efforts. To come back to our example, given Westminster's power concentration and majoritarian understanding of democracy, one might expect that collaboration and cooperation are not a priority. Consequently, one of Westminster's well-known features is that 'the cabinet is established by convention and does not have specific terms of reference or powers laid down in legislation' (Cabinet Office, 2011: para. 4.6). Rules are not written down; in practice they are better recognised as conventions that are not enforced by the law nor by the presiding officers in Parliament (Blick, 2016: 110; Weller et al., 2021: 101). Cooperation-wise, 'the problems occur when leading players question these practices and decide, as they so often have done in recent times, that the benefits from ignoring them are greater than the opprobrium generated by breaking them' (Weller et al., 2021: 102). From a path-dependent perspective however, 'institutional change often occurs precisely when problems of rule interpretation and enforcement open up space for actors to implement existing rules in new ways' (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009: 4). In fact, at the time of writing, the UK's unwritten constitution was identified by the Prime Minister as outdated and subject to change (Halliday & Adu, 2nd August 2026).

Outside practical reasons, the impact of institutional design and rules on procedural legitimacy is directly linked to cooperation: since establishing cooperation and maintaining

collaboration is costly in terms of time and resources, actors will seek to optimise their moves (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 5). These calculated moves are made according to the opportunity structure, the ‘preexisting collaboration ties or institutional arenas that actors may use to lower transaction and informational costs and increase their confidence that establishing a contact is worth the effort’ (Leifeld & Schneider, 2012: 733; Cames, 2010: 11). For corporatism, the fact that collaboration is a formal duty entrenched in governance structures reassures stakeholders that the deals are ‘not a cover for backroom private deals’ (Ibid.: 557). Having clear, officially recognised rules prevents unforeseen political moves and manipulation. One of the most important rules is simply access: making an actor feel like it has a legitimate opportunity to influence policy is a requisite for their commitment to the collaborative process, while the exclusion of certain stakeholders and issues of representation could threaten the legitimacy of the whole process (Gray 1989: 155). We discussed this when we spoke of recent criticisms of corporatism from British scholars (cf. p. 18-19).

2.3 Micro-Level: Process-Related Factors

To analyse political cooperation, we need to come closer to the actual process: what happens around the table is just as important as how the social partners got there. To this end, we use process-level collective governance theory, which more generally analyses governing arrangements where public agencies bring together non-state stakeholders into the decision-making process. As a process-level concept, collaborative governance can be opposed to alternative models of policymaking like adversarialism or managerialism (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 547). We conceptualise corporatism as a formal actualisation of collaborative governance, an administrative policymaking model that was formalised and institutionalised to circumvent political stalemate (Ibid.). We have seen that collaborative governance is an iterative process, a ‘virtuous cycle of collaboration [that] tends to develop when collaborative forums focus on “small wins” that deepen trust, commitment, and shared understanding’ (Ibid.: 543-544). The focus now is on how decisions are made: through face-to-face dialogue, trust-building, and commitment.

2.3.1 Policy Area

It is commonly accepted in comparative policy studies that some policy areas are more contentious than others: therefore ‘patterns of collaboration vary across policy sectors, depending on the characteristics of these sectors’ (Weible 2005: 473). For example, defence

policies are contentious due to high stakes and conflicts of interest (Hyde-Price, 2006: 218). Lowi (1972) also argued that redistributive policies were a high-conflict area requiring bargaining between larger groups of interest (Lowi, 1972: 300), which is the type of situation where corporatist interest representation arises. On a process-level, economic policy decisions indeed often have ‘a strong short-run component, and high time pressure, complicating consensus-building’ (Lehmbruch, 1977: 99) which is worth taking into account when analysing cooperation. Difficult policy areas where actors are reluctant to compromise will therefore need specific strategies to encourage cooperation (Lowi, 1972: Scharpf, 1988).

However, focusing on a single policy area does not paint a complete picture of the cooperative process: ‘in a political system, many decision-making processes develop in parallel and contemporaneously, actors have multiplex relations, and the creation of collaborative ties in a policy sector is likely influenced by collaboration established in other sectors’ (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 4; see also Zafonte & Sabatier 1998; Heaney 2014). Similarly, Lubell et al.’s (2010) ecology of games theory emphasises that actors are simultaneously negotiating in different institutional areas, which influences their strategic behaviour. Cross-sectoral collaboration is especially salient for redistributive or constitutive policies, but is blocked for regulative or distributive policies like infrastructure funds (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 18). Cross-policy dynamics do not influence collaboration in every case, calling for individual case studies.

2.3.2 Belief congruence and Preference Similarity

Establishing collaboration costs time and resources, which means that generally speaking, collaboration is a choice to be optimised (Lubell et al. 2002; North 1990). Institutional and relational factors can impact these calculations, but actors will keep looking out for opportunities where collaborative conditions are more favourable, ideally with minimal transaction costs while maximising outreach (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 3). As we said earlier, preexisting collaborative relationships or institutional structures may be used by actors to ‘lower transaction and informational costs and increase their confidence that establishing a contact is worth the effort’ (Leifeld & Schneider, 2012: 733).

When actors set out to ‘test the waters’, a factor that will greatly impact their willingness to cooperate is the perceived relative positioning of other actors. This position is measured in two main ways: short-term preference similarity, and longer-term core belief

congruence. Crucially, scholars found that while similar core beliefs and policy preferences mattered (Henry 2011: 379), what seemed to be even more important were long-standing conflicts affecting all actors in the subsystem (Zafonte and Sabatier 1998: 502), reinforcing our point about past history (cf. p.20). Social partners are in fact not that short-sighted: repeated conditioning will impact cooperative behaviour (Lubell, 2007). This also shows that similar beliefs and preferences are, of course, not sufficient to guarantee cooperation: a crucial prerequisite for belief-based cooperation is that actors have to already be interdependent (Zafonte and Sabatier 1998: 502).

Fischer & Sciarini (2016) showed that to increase the likelihood of achieving their policy goals, political actors often seek out to work with actors whom they see as powerful and most promising in terms of influence, preferably state actors with formal authority over decision making (Leifeld and Schneider 2012: 73). This means that reputation and prominence can matter more for cooperation than bureaucratic evaluations of objective performance (Schneider, 2015: 376). With the increasing organisational complexity of politics and its reliance on specialised knowledge, ‘mutual esteem’ (Heclo, 1978: 107) in issue networks is crucial. This shows political cooperation to be less of a zero-sum game and more a relational, cognitive process: ‘the primary interest of network members is intellectual or emotional commitment, whereas material interests are rather secondary’ (Schneider, 2015: 375).

2.3.3 Facilitative Leadership and Leader Personality

In politics, facilitative leadership is a ‘critical ingredient in bringing parties to the table and for steering them through the rough patches of the collaborative process’ (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 554). Leaders steer cooperation by incorporating more or less interventionist mediation techniques: ‘if stakeholders cannot reach a consensus with the help of mediation, the third party may craft a solution’ (Ibid.). Leaders, as ‘stewards of the collaborative process’ (Chrislip & Larson 1994: 125), are the ones who are expected to deal with power asymmetries and weak participative incentives. For corporatism, the state simultaneously acts as a leader and an actor constrained by its own rules. While not always put in place by the same government, state actors are the ones who maintain clear institutional rules, building trust, facilitating dialogue, and setting the agenda. The state also ensures the regularity and adequacy of the cooperative reports, ensuring that actors implement the policies they have agreed upon.

From a more micro-level perspective, individual leaders' personalities and leadership styles also impact the cooperative process. In all political contexts, from tripartite committees to party debates, policy behaviour is shaped by the roles leaders perceive themselves as occupying, which are socially constructed (Staerklé, 2015: 427-433; Thiers & Wehner, 2022: 3). Decision-making thus also depends on the process by which individuals evaluate alternatives and make choices that align with their beliefs and values, often influenced by cognitive processes, social influences, and the need to satisfy both individual and collective self-interests (Staerklé, 2015: 427). This is thus another factor to take into account, despite being harder to track.

2.3.4 Psychological Factors and Face-to-Face Dialogue

Cooperation is a deeply human process, conditioned by human perception and psychology. Commitment to cooperative policymaking comes as a 'significant psychological shift', whereas stakeholders develop 'a belief that good faith bargaining for mutual gains is the best way to achieve desirable policy outcomes' (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 559). This is the essence of the myth of New Atlantis: 'consensualism as an outcome transcends the political sphere and brings about a culture of compromise particularly in a small country context that diffuses conflict' (Cames, 2010: 2).

As a basic factor for cooperation, face-to-face dialogue allows for a quality of discussion that written or relayed negotiations through mediated channels do not provide (Holmes, 2018; Kelman, 1972). On the other hand, Computer-Mediated Communication discussions take longer, produce more ideas but with less normative pressure and poorer comprehension (Bordia, 1997). Face-to-face dialogue is crucial for stakeholders: it ideally allows for the 'breaking down stereotypes and other barriers to communication that prevent exploration of mutual gains in the first place' (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 558), again allowing the building of trust, respect, and shared experiences between social partners.

Another psychological factor is the impact of the physical arrangements of the discussion room (Goodsell, 1988: 287-302). The idea is perhaps best summarised by Churchill's own quote: 'we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us' (UK Parliament, 1943). Parliament buildings are statements of a country's traditions, culture, and vision, and their internal designs have a real impact on collaborative behaviour (Sailer, 2023: 375-388). Hemicycle designs, found in the European Parliament and in the Senedd, are intended to encourage consensus among parties rather than the 'adversarial

rectangular pattern', in the own words of the UK Parliament, of the Westminster model (Crosby, 2016). Churchill's quote stemmed from the same concept: when the Commons were debating rebuilding the chamber after the Blitz, he insisted that the adversarial rectangular shape was to be kept, as it was responsible for the two-party system.

3. Case Study: The Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act (2023)

Now that we have our political cooperation typology, we return to our research question on path-dependency: can Wales, devolved from the Westminster model, break from its path and successfully implement cooperative institutions usually found in consensus democracies?

On the 14th of March 2023, the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act was passed by Senedd Cymru. The Act's goal was to 'improve economic, environmental, social, and cultural well-being in Wales' by imposing new social partnership duties, especially in relation to fair work. To do so, it created a Social Partnership Council (SPC), made of members from the Welsh Government, 9 representatives of employers, and 9 representatives of workers (public, private, and third sectors) appointed by the First Minister for 3 years (Act, Part 1, sections 1-4 and 6). For employers, there is no official representative body, and the Minister is only required to have regard to their nominations. For trade union representatives, the First Minister 'must only appoint individuals who have been nominated' by Wales TUC (Act, Part 1, section 5). The SPC must meet at least 3 times in each 12-month period after members' appointments, chaired by the First Minister when possible, or a Deputy (Act, Part 1, section 7). In practice, this means involving trade unions in the process of decision-making, by 'consulting them at a formative stage of the process, providing sufficient information and time to enable them to properly consider what is proposed and respond [...] Both public bodies and Ministers must prepare, in respect of each financial year, a report of what it has done to comply with this duty' (Act, Part 1, Sections 16, 18, 19). Employers' reports must be agreed to with their respective trade unions, or contain a statement explaining why not. The Ministers lay their own report before the Senedd after agreeing with the SPC or writing a statement explaining why there was no agreement (Act, Part 2, sections 16-20).

Apart from its institutional framework, what makes the Act corporatist and therefore path-breaking is its introduction of a legally binding 'Duty' of social partnership (Act, Part

2, sections 16-20) that came into force in April 2024 (llywodraeth Cymru, 2024). This Duty places an obligation on the state to seek consensus or compromise with their recognised employers' organisations and trade unions and to report yearly on these processes. In other words, it legally introduces a corporatist institution into a different model of democracy. The Act is contained within the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, meaning corporatist social partnership is not a standalone idea but is integrated into the long-term governance architecture Wales already had. This means that despite the UK's majoritarian model, Wales has been working toward enabling long-term, cross-cycle policy commitment; the parties who put this system in place will be under the same Duty for the next electoral cycles, allowing repeated social contact and the building of trust. It was presented by then-First Minister Mark Drakeford as a 'uniquely Welsh way of working' (llywodraeth Cymru: 2022), deeply committed to dialogue with unions (Perry, 24 May 2023).

Not every social partnership works the same: each public body may choose to create their own internal boards and institutions to comply with the Act. The Welsh government keeps a database with the first-year compliance reports of 48 public bodies covered by the Act, including local authorities, NHS bodies, and other national bodies (llywodraeth Cymru, 6 July 2026). It shows that cooperation processes differ in urban versus rural councils, but also in different health boards (which often have more adversarial industrial relations histories, see Hywel, 10 November 2025), national resource boards, etc. Our case study takes the example of the Monmouthshire report as a best-case scenario since its unions have been prominent there, despite its historically disputed Welsh status (Gooberman, 2017: 3, 6).

3.1 Macro-level: structural factors

Country size & Macroeconomics

Wales is a small country in a devolved context, which complicates our analysis. Identifying 'the Welsh economy' is already problematic. Katzenstein's theory wasn't designed to study intra-state variation: therefore, it is indistinguishable from the UK's liberal market economy (LME). While Welsh politics are quite different from the rest of the UK, Wales has known similar economic history—from the global effects of war, depression, to industrialisation between 1951 to 1970, then Thatcherism— before eventually, from 1997 on, breaking away with devolution. Moreover, in his longitudinal

study of Welsh economic history, Gooberman notes that ‘works with an economic focus are largely absent from the published history of twentieth century Wales’ (Gooberman, 2017: 2).

Despite its specific political history and small size, Wales does qualify as an LME. From a path-dependency perspective, we have seen that in LMEs, sectoral stakeholders have different skill investments and less cooperative experience, thus they ‘will find it difficult to develop non-market coordination of the sort common in CMEs, even when the relevant institutions can be put into place’ (Hall & Soskice, 2001: 63, see also Thelen, 2001: 74). The fact that the Social Partnership Act still passed is therefore a strong empirical result: it suggests the enabling conditions outlined in our typology were strong enough to work against the structural predictions.

Democratic Model, Electoral System

Does Westminster’s majoritarian architecture structurally impede the kind of coordination the Welsh Act is trying to legislate into existence? From a macro-level perspective, Taagepera finds that among Lijphart’s democracy measures only electoral rules are subject to institutional engineering, albeit as we saw these rules affect cooperation indirectly and partly (Taagepera, 2003: 13) (cf. p. 14-15).

Because of its industrial history, Wales had a traditionally dominant Welsh Labour party (Convery, 2025: 258). We saw that in majority systems, a one-party dominance decreases incentives for cooperation (cf. p.16). From a policymaking standpoint, it meant that ‘moves to build national institutions for Wales have overwhelmingly relied on the support of [Welsh Labour]’ (Ibid.: 262), all the while being confined within devolution’s limits and Britain’s traditionally right-wing politics. As a consequence, ‘executive ability, including a detailed interest in the implementation of public policy, [was] at a premium’ (Ibid.: 266), leading ministers to be especially concerned with multi-level politics (Wyn Jones and Larner 2020). Therefore, Welsh Ministers have more experience considering strategic allies and opponents, unlike Westminster’s single-party cabinets. The result is a polity which, ‘behind the banner waving of party politics, has a strong vein of consensualism through a common concern for the condition of Wales’ (Jenkins et al., 2026: xi). This combination of one-party dominance and devolution puts Wales in a very different position (Stafford, 2016: 403), making the setting up of devolved expert committees and corporatist practices a much more salient option (Jenkins et al., 2026: 156).

The Welsh electoral system also breaks away from the Westminster model: from 1999 to 2021, Wales used the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system, combining FPTP constituency seats with proportional regional seats (PR), which already shaped party politics differently (Evans, 15 April 2020). The 2026 Senedd election, which properly broke Welsh Labour's dominance, came after further reforms, one of which was the adoption of party-list PR (Mansfield, 2024). The Greens entered the Senedd for the first time, and Plaid Cymru emerged as the largest party with 43 seats. Welsh Labour had been progressively losing steam; after a first formal coalition in 2007, it then entered a co-operation agreement with Plaid Cymru in 2021 (which at the time finished 3rd in the elections), a large policy collaboration agreement on almost 50 devolved policy areas (Morris, 2021; Masters, 2022). Many of their collaborative goals involved setting up committees or expert groups. While the agreement fell through after leadership changes, this set up a precedent for cooperative opportunities. Adam Price, leader of Plaid, said the agreement was a 'radical counterpoint' to the confrontational nature of Westminster politics (Morris, 2021). The Act's passage overlapped with this Welsh Labour-Plaid Cymru cooperation agreement (Gareth, 2021), and the government explicitly credited Plaid Cymru as partners in getting it through (Blythyn, 2023). This cooperation can be explained by shifting voting behaviour, forcing a majoritarian democracy to increasingly act as a consensus democracy, which is a UK-wide phenomenon. Thus, at the electoral and democratic model stage, Wales branches off from the Westminster model.

Interest Group Organisation: Pluralism & Corporatism

Thelen developed a theory of institutional change to 'show how outcomes gradually change over time as a result of a series of events that slightly shift developmental trajectories' (Mahoney & Schensul, 2006: 464). Through historical-institutionalist accounts, she explains that change can happen within path-dependent contexts not only because of exogenous shocks or punctuated equilibrium (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009: 15-16; Crouch & Keune, 2005: 83) but also in cases of 'layering', when new rules are added 'on top of or alongside existing ones' (Ibid.: 15). These mechanisms of institutional change are usually dependent on the behaviour of the machine and metalworking industries (Thelen, 2004: 278) as well as on the political context (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009: 19). Therefore, industry skills, union history and institutional change are all intimately linked, even within path-dependent contexts.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Welsh mode of interest representation is not distinguishable from the UK's pluralist model. However, upon closer look, Welsh institutions do have their own history. With deindustrialisation, Wales had to face a potentially fatal structural weakness: an over-dependence on coal and steel, with a narrow manufacturing base of branch factories vulnerable to relocation. In response, the Welsh Development Agency (WDA) was established as a statutory body with its own board to work closely with industry (Gooberman & Boyns, 2019: 2). In response to that same diagnosis and grassroots campaigning from Welsh trade unionists, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) set up the Wales TUC (WTUC) in 1974, despite little support from the then-corporatist Westminster government (see p.15) (England, 2004: 37-38). The WTUC, with its own parallel economic development infrastructure, constitutionally established itself as a distinct and autonomous part of the wider trade union movement: a union confederation acting as an economic development actor in its own right, not merely lobbying state agencies. This was a novel move, as in the 70s there was little appetite for devolution, even in parts of the union movement itself (Perry, 2024). The WTUC discussed a wide range of issues, from industry-specific subjects, devolution, and Celtic oil, to toll charges, vehicles for handicapped persons, and Welsh trade union organisation (England, 2004: 41).

Following the failure of British corporatism, Thatcher's election did not help the growing gap between Wales and Westminster: facilitated by preexisting cleavages in Welsh society (social class, national identity and language, which also mattered for Welsh Labour political support, see Convery, 2025: 258), there was a growing sense that Wales needed its own national interest representation forum. Despite Thatcher's attack on 'the enemy within', the WTUC acquired devolved-like powers long before the 1999 referendum (Perry, 2024; Jenkins et al., 2026: xi), and has since maintained ongoing legitimacy. To this day, 'trade unions are an essential part of the economic and political landscape in Wales [...] due to a larger public sector workforce, cultural and geographical legacies of industry in Wales, and political support via the social partnership model' (Webb et al., 2019: 4). As a result of the historical prominence of Welsh unions, the consequences of devolution, and Welsh political culture, its path truly branched off from Westminster's interest representation system (Jenkins et al., 2026: x-xi).

3.2 Meso-level: Cultural and Historical Factors

Starting conditions: past history, power imbalance

The Monmouthshire County Council 2025 Social Partnership report underlines the importance of past collaborative institutions: ‘there are many social partnership arrangements within and between individual organisations, sector-wide representative groups, and recognised trade unions, some with a long history. In the absence of any statutory underpinning, those existing partnership structures have developed voluntarily and organically over time, taking a variety of different approaches to partnership working’ (Monmouthshire Sir Fynwy, 2025). The Act, in their words, is the culmination of this history of social partnership in Wales. Both the WDA and WTUC were specialised bodies trying to manage industrial decline outside of parliamentary politics; a state investment agency on one side and an autonomous union confederation building its own institutions on the other. They remained parallel institutions: the Act, with its associated Duty, is what truly integrated this social partnership into law, as an example of institutional engineering (Labour Research Department, 2024). The Monmouthshire County Council’s reference to this history reminds us that past history of cooperation, even without proper levers of power or official recognition, facilitates institutional collaboration later on (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016: 24). Wales already had the actors of corporatism (a state development agency and an autonomous ‘peak’ union body) acting in a pluralist interest representation system without a corporatist institutional architecture. The Act thus did not create an institution out of thin air, and is a case of ‘layering’ (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009: 15) in a devolved Westminster model. In corporatist states, a similar “meso-corporatist” phenomenon has been observed, where regional governments innovated and shaped industrial adjustment more than the federal government (Allen, 1989).

Regarding power imbalances with Welsh social actors, while the WTUC is historically powerful, it is nonetheless ‘increasingly restricted by the decline in trade union membership’ (Webb et al., 2019: 4). The lack of data regarding collective bargaining outcomes does not help build legitimacy for social partners: the Act tries to tackle this issue by requiring yearly reports on policy evolution to help them make evidence-informed decisions. Furthermore, the Act’s Theory of Change (ToC) points out the need for ‘greater engagement from employers and government’ to achieve the Act’s intended outcomes, and identified ‘potential imbalances of influence among partners’ as one of the risks to

successful delivery, alongside limited understanding of the Act, political challenges hindering stakeholder engagement, time and resource constraints, and devolved power limitations (llywodraeth Cymru, ToC, 2023). This publicly available Theory of Change is an example of a strategy that anticipates stakeholders' needs, aiming to encourage cooperation (cf. p. 20) and to establish the project's legitimacy.

Institutional Design: rules, predictability and procedural legitimacy

Despite occurring in an LME, the Act set up 'institutions that reduce the uncertainty actors have about the behaviour of others' by providing 'capacities for i) the exchange of information among the actors, (ii) the monitoring of behaviour, and (iii) the sanctioning of defection from cooperative endeavour' (Hall & Soskice, 2001: 10-11), thus facilitating cooperation and collaboration. The Act was implemented incrementally with a set of progressive rules: on top of the yearly reports from all partners, 'at the end of a five-year post-implementation period, Welsh Ministers must report to the Senedd on how the Act has performed and whether it has achieved what it set out to do' (llywodraeth Cymru, ToC, 2023). This aims to ensure procedural legitimacy: 'the ToC provides an assessment of the pre-Act conditions from which change and progress can be measured' (Ibid.). We saw that when power is shared, setting down clear rules becomes crucial (cf. p.22): the ToC, by describing the Act's logic, aims, resources, risks, assumptions, sources, and outputs (llywodraeth Cymru, ToC, 2023), is a tool to accomplish this. It simultaneously ensures that social partners can understand the Act, and that a future evaluation can be conducted based on its initial recommendations. To make that eventual evaluation possible, in March 2025 the Internal Research Programme gave an evaluability assessment of the Act, commissioned by the government. Its findings also intend to inform future stages of evaluation, discussing for example 'the practical elements for an evaluation, such as potential uses, timing, budget, and capacity' (llywodraeth Cymru, 12 March 2026).

Notably, the council noted that 'a change in government may impact the approach to social partnership, fair work and procurement', questioning the long-term stability of the Act. This is why institutional engineering can only impact cooperation when accompanied by micro-level factors; political and contextual circumstances might change, even if stakeholders will still be bound by the Act's Duty. Like Thelen argued, only procedural and relational commitment to cooperation, with access to the right institutions, can lead to longstanding collaboration.

3.3 Micro-level: Process-related factors

Policy area, Belief Congruence and Preference Similarity, Facilitative Leadership, Psychological Factors and Face-to-Face Dialogue

Micro-level factors are unfortunately largely under-reported, leaving us with little to analyse. The recent reports and opinion pieces discussing the Act mention the importance of Chief Executive, board members and senior leaders championing social partnership (Hywel, 2025: 5; Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru, 2025). The Monmouthshire Council report described quarterly tripartite ‘Joint Advisory Group Meetings’ with a ‘commitment to gain consensus and agreement on all HR policies’ (Monmouthshire Sir Fynwy, 2025: 6), indicating that the psychological benefits of face-to-face dialogue are being reaped. It also described pre-existing ‘formal consultation arrangements’ and regular informal dialogue with trade unions for ‘budget setting processes, workforce planning, restructuring processes [...] and new ways of working/improving processes for colleagues and managers’ (Ibid.: 7). We said earlier that collaborative governance outcomes vary by sector (p.20); we note that the policies being discussed in the Monmouthshire Council remain less controversial. The Act's designated sectors (procurement, workforce well-being, and public services reform) are lower-conflict, technocratic and regulatory areas where unions and employers might already share broadly overlapping interests. In comparison, the more difficult redistributive or regulatory policies (like pay bargaining or industrial relations) are not yet reportedly being tackled by the Act. Perhaps after some more time spent building trust, these policies will surface.

Since the Act is being phased in incrementally, empirical evidence of its effects on policy outcomes is scarce (Cullen, 11 February 2026). Regular reports from Ministers, social partners and press articles show where the Act is headed: in a positive, yet still incomplete direction. At the time of writing, reporting requirements guidelines were still changing to require more structure and transparency from social actors to ‘evidence their delivery of socially responsible outcomes’ (Christen & Masters, 10 June 2026). Up next in the process is for authorities to ‘design processes to collect and report the data required’ (Ibid.). Importantly, Wales still does not have an official peak organisation for employers; while they are involved in tripartite talks, the Act primarily targets trade union collaboration. However, employers’ implication in corporatist policymaking is

crucial, especially for social policy (Mares, 2001: 212). Moreover, recent reports point out that the Act's coverage is only partial. While the public sector enjoys high union membership and bargaining frameworks characterised by strong coordination mechanisms, the private sector remains underrepresented: 'such workers are unlikely to feel the benefits of the wider climate for social dialogue that has been established by the Welsh Government' (Jenkins et al., 2026: 156). These workers are usually localised and lower-paid, intensifying the 'geography of discontent' (Ibid.: 157). Corporatism's greatest weakness remains unaddressed: it seems Wales cannot yet rely on high voluntary engagement, the Act still being in its early developmental stages.

4. Concluding Discussion

This dissertation set out to answer two related questions: 1) What are the factors that facilitate political collaboration? 2) Can these factors be manufactured and implemented successfully in a different model of democracy?

Our typology shed light on the first question: on the macro-level, small country size and (often crisis-induced) coordinated macroeconomic planning create the first conditions for political cooperation between social partners, usually leading to corporatist tripartite institutions. The democratic model, whether it considers a majority as fit to rule or if it prefers to maximise consensual majorities, is another factor that leads to different electoral systems. Majoritarian elections, using FPTP, lead to two-party systems with little coalitional experience. Consensus democracies, using PR, are forced to share power and seek alliances. However, the fact that British elections are increasingly behaving like multi-party elections already pointed at the idea that path-dependence was not as rigid as Lijphart suggested. Finally, interest group representation in corporatist states meant that tripartite industrial relations also benefit from cooperative experience, being legally required to share the costs of deadlock and success. The relational advantages of such collective governance systems lead to predictability and recognition of mutual interest, forming a virtuous cycle. Pluralism, on the other hand, remains in a system of adversarial relations.

Switching to the meso-level, we analysed how institutions designed to facilitate consensus aimed to create relational opportunity structures for stakeholders to bargain, share common interest, and build mutual trust. Such institutions facilitate cooperation (and long-term collaboration) by engineering advantageous starting conditions: making sure all actors are on an even footing, legally making social partners interdependent, and

setting down rules requiring regular reports. Institutions remain imperfect, and can fail even in the most traditionally corporatist countries: what matters is that procedural legitimacy and social recognition push actors to come back to the discussion table.

Lastly, micro-level factors showed what happened during the process of cooperation: certain policy areas, such as redistributive policies, are harder to agree on, and involve cross-sectoral interests. Actors' past history and beliefs about others' power also impact cooperative behaviour. Facilitative leadership, and individual leadership styles, also impact the process. Finally, human psychology shows that face-to-face discussion in non-adversarial settings also encourages cooperation.

Regarding our second question, the Welsh case study showed evidence that some conditions for long-term political collaboration can be engineered even in a majoritarian democracy. To see this, we had to account for historical and institutional factors rather than only focusing on exogenous economic shocks or political equilibrium. We saw that election systems greatly impact political cooperation: the Welsh devolved legislature was using a mixed-member proportional system, before now switching to party-list PR, which produces coalition-oriented governments within a majoritarian UK system. Moreover, Wales' historical specificities meant the Act was incorporated into a preexisting context of industrial organisation, hence the importance of our meso-level factors. The Welsh case, illustrated by the Act, shows that path dependence constrains institutional development without wholly determining it. However, our results also showed that while Wales imposed a statutory duty on Welsh Ministers to consult social partners, to achieve long-term collaboration the Act also needs to create more relational opportunities, pointing directly at the social dimension of our typology. That gap between designing public forums and building the organisational capacity to populate it, is one of the absent conditions of the Welsh case: while going in the right direction, cooperation remains limited to less contentious policy areas like procurement, workforce well-being, and public services reform. It also neglects other sectors outside the public, intensifying representative and collaborative disparities: 'the risk is yet more failed promises and another false dawn for workers in Wales. At this point in history, such a failure should not be countenanced' (Jenkins et al., 2026: 157).

While we focused on corporatist organisations of interest, it is worth mentioning that the collective governance literature also made contributions about other modes of interest

representation, as with syndicalism or more local civil governance, which also have cooperative potential. Further research could also take a comparative look at first-year compliance reports, studying how the Act works in practice in different policy areas and public bodies. Moreover, more micro-level reports should be available regarding political cooperation: we ought not underestimate how much human psychology defines everyday politics.

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